

The news of the stormy reception of his comedy reached Ibsen in Egypt, where, as the guest of the Khedive, he was attending the opening of the Suez Canal. He has recorded the incident in a poem, *At Port Said*. On his return to Dresden he wrote to Hegel (December 14, 1869): "The reception of *The League of Youth* pleases me very much; for the disapprobation I was prepared, and it would have been a disappointment to me if there had been none. But what I was not prepared for was that Björnson should feel himself attacked by the play, as rumour says he does. Is this really the case? He must surely see that it is not himself I have had in mind, but his pernicious and 'lie-steeped' clique who have served me as models. However, I will write to him to-day or to-morrow, and I hope that the affair, in spite of all differences, will end in a reconciliation." The intended letter does not appear to have been written; nor would it, probably, have produced the desired effect, for Björnson's resentment was very deep. He had already (in November) written a poem to Johan Sverdrup, the leader of the Liberal party, in which he deplored the fact that "the sacred grove of poetry no longer afforded sanctuary against assassination," or as the Norwegian word vigorously expresses it, "sneak-murder." Long afterwards, in 1881, he explained what he meant by this term: "It was not the portrayal of contemporary life and known personages that I called assassination. It was the fact that *The League of Youth* sought to represent our young Liberal party as a gang of ambitious speculators, whose patriotism was as empty as their phraseology; and particularly

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PILLARS OF SOCIETY

WITH INTRODUCTIONS BY
WILLIAM ARCHER



NEW YORK
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

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INTRODUCTIONS BY WILLIAM ARCHER

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Printed in the United States of America



CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION TO "THE LEAGUE OF YOUTH" . .	vii
INTRODUCTION TO "PILLARS OF SOCIETY" . . .	xvi
"THE LEAGUE OF YOUTH"	1
<i>Translated by WILLIAM ARCHER</i>	
"PILLARS OF SOCIETY"	227
<i>Translated by WILLIAM ARCHER</i>	

Oct. 19, '31 - Pub. - 1.60



THE LEAGUE OF YOUTH

INTRODUCTION*

AFTER the momentous four years of his first visit to Italy, to which we owe *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, Ibsen left Rome in May, 1868, visited Florence, and then spent the summer at Berchtesgaden in southern Bavaria. There he was busy "mentally wrestling" with the new play which was to take shape as *De Unges Forbund* (*The League of Youth*); but he did not begin to put it on paper until, after a short stay at Munich, he settled down in Dresden, in the early autumn. Thence he wrote to his publisher, Hegel, on October 31: "My new work is making rapid progress. . . . The whole outline is finished and written down. The first act is completed, the second will be in the course of a week, and by the end of the year I hope to have the play ready. It will be in prose, and in every way adapted for the stage. The title is *The League of Youth*; or, *The Almighty & Co.*, a comedy, in five acts." At Hegel's suggestion he omitted the second title, "though," he wrote, "it could have given offence to no one *who had read the play*."

Apparently the polishing of the dialogue took longer than Ibsen anticipated. It was his first

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play in modern prose, and the medium did not come easy to him. Six or seven years earlier, he wrote the opening scenes of *Love's Comedy* in prose, but was dissatisfied with the effect, and recast the dialogue in rhymed verse. Having now outgrown his youthful romanticism, and laid down, in *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, the fundamental positions of his criticism of life, he felt that to carry that criticism into detail he must come to close quarters with reality; and to that end he required a suppler instrument than verse. He must cultivate, as he afterwards* put it, "the very much more difficult art of writing the genuine, plain language spoken in real life." Probably the mastery of this new art cost him more effort than he anticipated, for, instead of having the play finished by the end of 1868, he did not despatch the manuscript to Copenhagen until March, 1869. It was published on September 30 of that year.

While the comedy was still in process of conception, Ibsen had written to his publisher: "This new, *peaceable* work is giving me great pleasure." It thus appears that he considered it less polemical in its character than the poems which had immediately preceded it. If his intentions were pacific, they were entirely frustrated. The play was regarded as a violent and wanton attack on the Norwegian Liberal party, while Stensgård was taken for a personal lampoon on Björnson. Its first performance at the Christiania Theatre (October 18, 1869) passed quietly enough; but at the second and third per-

* Letter to Lucie Wolf, May, 1883. *Correspondence*, Letter 171.

performances an organised opposition took the field, and disturbances amounting almost to a riot occurred. Public feeling soon calmed down, and the play (the first prose comedy of any importance in Norwegian literature) became one of the most popular pieces in the repertory of the theatre. But it led to an estrangement from Björnson and the Liberal party which was not healed for many a day—not, indeed, until *Ghosts* had shown the Norwegian public the folly of attempting to make party capital out of the works of a poet who stood far above party.

The estrangement from Björnson had begun some time before the play appeared. A certain misunderstanding had followed the appearance of *Peer Gynt*,* and had been deepened by political differences. Björnson had become an ardent National Liberal, with leanings towards Republicanism; Ibsen was not at all a Republican (he deeply offended Björnson by accepting orders and decorations), and his political sympathies, while not of a partisan nature, were mainly "Scandinavian"—that is to say, directed towards a closer union of the three Scandinavian kingdoms. Distance, and the evil offices of gossiping friends, played their part in begetting dissension. Ibsen's last friendly letter to Björnson (of these years) was written in the last days of 1867; in the first days of 1869, while he was actually busied with *The League of Youth*, we find him declining to contribute to a Danish magazine for the reason (among others) that Björnson was to be one of its joint editors.

* See *Correspondence*, Letters 44 and 45.